

You saw what?

by Robin West

The phone at the Refuge office rang and the caller asked to speak to a biologist. After getting connected the caller starts, “You’re probably not going to believe this, but I saw a...”

This call comes in many times a year. Sometimes the caller saw something that they only believed was rare, but actually is seen regularly by our staff working in the field. Sometimes the reports are of critters that really shouldn’t be found anywhere in the area, but strange things happen in nature. And sometimes the reports are pretty far fetched.

Examples of the first category include such things as wolves and wolverines. A sighting of these animals for many is a rare event, yet biologists working in remote areas, or flying aerial surveys, rarely pass a month without observing one or both of these species.

Examples of the second category include animals like mountain lions and deer. We have received several unconfirmed reports of mountain lions (or cougars) on the Kenai Peninsula during the past several years. None of these has been confirmed, but on occasion, mountain lions have ventured into areas of Alaska. They are secretive creatures and are not commonly observed even where they are abundant. It’s likely that some of these reports come from people observing something else, yet, some of the observations have come with adamant testimony, and it is quite possible that the observations have been accurate.

A report was received from a caller a couple of winters back who claimed to have seen a Sitka black-tailed deer in the Skilak Loop area. Biologists were not convinced; however, the following spring a winter-killed doe was found in the general area where it had been initially reported. Of course deer are scattered on some of the islands and coastal areas of Prince William Sound, but what got into this individual to make the trek across the Kenai Mountains, no one will ever know.

And we are still looking for a flying squirrel. We have observed a strange girdling of birch stems (usually 1 to 2 inches in diameter) which possibly was done by flying squirrels. Occurrences of this girdling are extremely sporadic, e.g., near the gate on Swan Lake

Road and along Finger Lakes Road, but we have seen no fresh sign for several years. No birds, other mammals or insects are known feed on birch in this manner; flying squirrels are our best hypothesis, but we have never seen a flying squirrel on the Refuge, let alone seeing one actually peeling birch bark around a stem and eating the inner bark.

Here are some examples of the far-fetched category. These are kind of like seeing Elvis arrive at your neighbor’s house (in a flying saucer). I had only been here a few months when I got my first such call: Bigfoot was seen on the Funny River Horse Trail. Now I’m not saying the caller didn’t see Bigfoot, but I sure would like to see Bigfoot with my own eyes before I add it to the resident Refuge species list.

All in all there are approximately 41 species of mammals and 177 species of birds that have been verified to occur on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Clearly some of these are quite common, such as moose and bald eagles, while others such as red fox, snowy owls, and great blue herons are rarely seen. As climates and habitats change, wildlife populations expand, or flukes of nature occur, new species will undoubtedly populate the area.

We are very interested in getting reports of unusual wildlife sightings. And yes, sometimes you may get a raised eyebrow when you tell the biologist what you saw, but don’t let that dissuade you. If you do observe something you believe to be really rare, a little detective work on your part can add greatly to your case. Obviously a good photograph or video footage would be great, but a plaster cast of a track, or if the opportunity arises, the collection of a feather or some hair, can be used to conclusively identify the animal. Please don’t shoot it and bring it in. I say that because if you do see Bigfoot, I don’t want it said that I am to blame for its demise.

Have fun watching wildlife, and keep those calls coming in!

Robin West is the manager of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.